

PRATHAM BOOKS
A Book in Every Child's Hand

Level 4

# The Maldhok in the Desert

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The haunting notes of the shepherd's reed flute die down. In the haze of dusk, the sheep bump against each other, bleating all the way home.

On one side of the flock, a unique shepherd is at work; with ostrich-like legs, he bends over to peck, nudge and guide, leaving three-toed footprints on the desert sand.

Gagan is a Great Indian Bustard – a maldhok – picked up as an orphaned chick and trained by a young boy to herd his sheep.

Gagan's master Chaitan tucks his *narh* away and swings his stick onto his shoulders to rest his tired arms. His giant red *shafo* offers little protection from the relentless Rajasthan sun.

Chaitan's weary foot, in a battered curly-tip shoe, is scorched by the hot sands. The other is an artificial Jaipur limb.

* Narh - Flute made from desert grass

* Shafo - Turban worn by Rajasthani men



*Kako* and *Kaki* got this made for him after he recovered from polio. They had taken him in and nursed him back to health when his parents abandoned him. Now Chaitan can run, squat, climb trees… He's as agile as any boy in the village.

* Kaki and Kako - Aunt and uncle

With the sheep safe in their pen, Chaitan heads towards the hut under the old khejri tree. The smell of Kaki's food makes his mouth water. There's a stranger eating with Kako. Chaitan hesitates.

"Come, Chaitan!" Kako beckons with a grin. "Meet our guest!"

"Namaste sahib," Chaitan says with a bow.

A snake charmer? His sidelong gaze fixes on the *poongi* and the flat basket on the floor. Would a cobra strike at him any minute? Chaitan frowns.

"This is our only child – our son," says Kako, wrapping his arm around Chaitan.

"Hmmm…" says the snake charmer, licking his fingers. As he's washing his hands, his bloodshot eyes spot the maldhok pecking at bugs outside.

* Poongi - Snake charmer's flute made from a gourd

“Thank you for the tasty meal. Next time we can eat a bird,” he says, baring his yellow teeth in a malicious grin.

“NO!” bursts out Chaitan.

“Ha! Ha! Goodbye!” says the snake charmer, picking up his basket and poongi.

“Don’t you dare touch my maldhok!” screams Chaitan, following him out to the open desert.

“Aha! You dare me?” asks the snake charmer, glaring down his crooked nose and bushy moustache.

He raises the poongi to his lips. Chaitan quakes. Icy cold fingers of fear crush his thumping heart. Quick as a darting deer, he blows a sharp warning on his narh.

With a slow flap of wings, Gagan lifts off, flying low over the rooftops and khejri trees. What a majestic sight it is to see this heavy bird fly! In a few minutes, he is a speck over the horizon of sand dunes.

Chaitan thrills to the sound of flapping wings. The flutter in his heart calms down.
He knows Gagan will return despite sandstorms or intense heat that shrivels you up.



As morning brightens the sky, Chaitan sprints to the pen to let the sheep out. With fearful, puffy eyes, he frantically searches for Gagan.

‘Please come home – I miss you so,’ he thinks. Leaving his sheep behind, he knuckles his damp eyes and sets off to scan the desert. Chaitan hunts in vain for Gagan’s footprints. If only maldhok didn’t fly! But how else could Gagan have escaped the vicious snake charmer?

Chaitan scurries through dry grasslands. He reaches the edge of the village, marked by a line of thorny bushes. Then, pausing, he picks up his narh to play that haunting tune.

He hears a soft bark. Had he imagined it? He plays the narh again. This time, he hears a stronger bellow from behind the sand dune. As he jumps across the thorny bushes, his *angarkhi* tears, his dhoti is in shreds.

Yes! It is Gagan! “There you are!” Chaitan leaps for joy. Gagan lies limp, eyes glazed, his leg caught in a trap.

“Oh Gagan! Thank goodness you’re alive!” Chaitan kneels over his precious friend. Gently, he frees the bird from jaws of steel. His leg is badly wounded.

* Angarkhi - Rajasthani jacket worn by men



“Don’t worry, I’ll look after you. First, some water from the *johad*,” cries Chaitan. “Come, my maldhok.
I can’t leave you alone...must carry you along somehow.”

He breaks off a thick woody stem from a bush. He bandages it on to Gagan’s leg with a piece of the shafo he tears off. The bird rests heavily against Chaitan’s shoulder. The boy drags and coaxes him and they reach an almost dry well nearby. The johad is too far away.

Opening out his shafo, Chaitan ties a rock to one end and throws it into the well. ‘Don’t slip!’ Chaitan warns himself. He’s lying on his stomach and leaning into the well. He lets the cloth soak before pulling it up.

Chaitan squeezes some water on Gagan’s beak. Revived, the maldhok gets up, limps and falls.

* Johad - a small dam to collect rainwater



“That’s my Gagan!” Wetting his own parched lips, Chaitan dips the shafo again and again until they have both had enough. By evening, Gagan regains enough strength to fly home in spurts. “Yay!” cry the village kids. Everyone crowds around Gagan.

Soon, with Kaki’s herbal potion, Gagan’s leg gets stronger.

“C’mon Gagan, time to be where the action is,” Chaitan calls out, taking him to his sheep. With a hop and a skip, Gagan is beside the shepherd boy and the flock.



One day, rain clouds darken the sky. Chaitan spots a few maldhoks in the distance. He hears a deep booming mating call from Gagan.

‘This is as rare as a rain cloud in Rajasthan,’ thinks Chaitan. ‘Is my Gagan calling out to a female?’
Strutting with his wings spread out, Gagan flaps his tail and lets out a loud moan. And with a majestic sweep of wings, he flies towards the female.

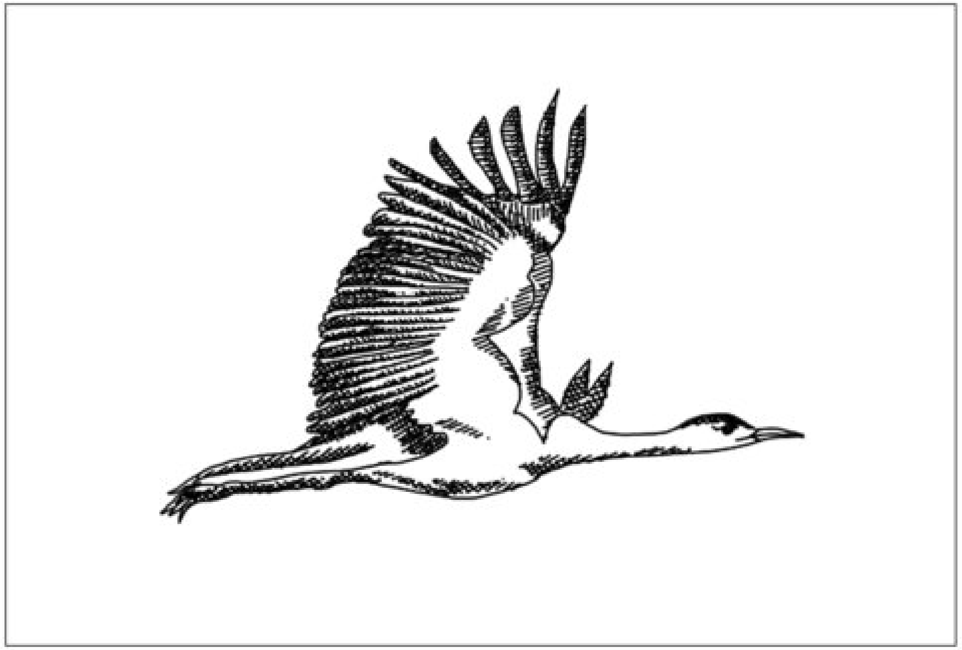
Chaitan plays his haunting tune again. The notes from the narh swell to a crescendo. And fade away.



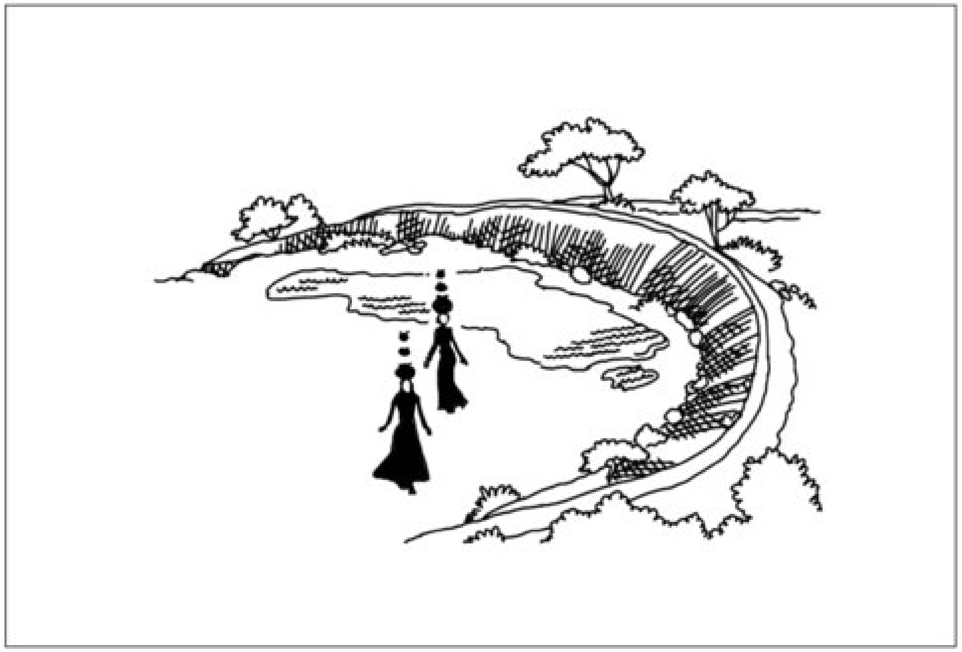




The **Jaipur Foot** is an artificial limb made mainly of rubber. Orthopaedic surgeon Dr. P. K. Sethi guided sculptor Ram Chandra Sharma to invent this in 1968 for victims of landmine explosions. It is designed in Jaipur using low-cost local materials. The Jaipur Foot is waterproof, quick to manufacture and easy to be fitted. Wearing it, the amputee can run, squat, climb a tree or ride a bike.



The **Great Indian Bustard** is known as the maldhok in Rajasthan. This bird is hunted for its flesh, and its habitat is destroyed for agriculture. It is now almost extinct. A striking ostrich-like bird, it has a black crown and a pale neck and head. The wings and the rest of the body are black and brown. The bird, one of the heaviest that can fly, never glides. It flies low, with a slow flap of wings. It eats grass, seeds, grasshoppers, beetles, small rodents and reptiles.



**Johad** is the name given to small earthen check dams. Due to the extreme heat and desert conditions in Rajasthan, rainwater is harvested in these tanks. Johads are formed when semi-circular mud barriers are built across slopes to catch the monsoon run-off. The rainwater is harvested in these tanks and held for agriculture.



The **khejri** tree, or the wild desert tree, supports the people of Rajasthan in many ways. Sangri is its protein rich fruit. It can be eaten fresh, or as a cooked vegetable. While its dead leaves are natural fertilizers, other parts of the tree are fed to cattle to increase their milk yield.

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# The Maldhok in the Desert
(English)

Chaitan’s family seldom has guests. One day, a guest arrives. Why does his visit trouble not only Chaitan, but also his dearest friend Gagan? This is a tale of turmoil in the life of a young boy and a near-extinct bird, set in a remote part of Rajasthan.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.